DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 397 478 CE 072 121

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TITLE Using Pre-Instruction Questionnaires To Improve the Small Group Writing Class. Teacher to Teacher.
INSTITUTION Kent State Univ., OH. Ohio Literacy Resource Center.
SPONS AGENCY Department of Education, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Aug 96
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; *Diagnostic Teaching; Educational Needs; Needs Assessment; Student Characteristics; Student Experience; *Student Interests; Student Needs; *Student Surveys; *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

A pre-instruction questionnaire was used with two small group writing classes at Goodwill Industries of the Miami Valley, Inc. (Ohio). The questionnaire was designed to provide as much information as possible about the students' knowledge and background in writing. The survey had four purposes: determine what kinds of writing students currently did or had done in the past, identify what types of writing interested the students, get each student's view of his/her writing, and determine whether students had thought about what personal goals they wanted to achieve by completing the course. Five categories of questions were included. The first set of questions were "types" questions that gave a sense of the students' experience with writing and types of writing. The second group were "likes/dislikes" questions in which students identified what they liked and did not like about writing. The third group included "comfort level" questions that determined how comfortable students felt writing. The fourth category contained "self-analysis" questions in which students thought about themselves as learners, writers, and goal setters. The final two questions were general questions--one that asked if the student had ever kept a diary or journal and another that asked if students received a newspaper at home. Results of the questionnaire helped the instructor plan and teach the class. (The questionnaire is appended.) (YLB)

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Ohio Literacy Resource Center

Enhancing adult literacy in the State of Ohio

035-8300-0812
August 1996

ED 397 272

Teacher To Teacher

Using Pre-Instruction Questionnaires to Improve the Small Group Writing Class

by Bryan Bardine
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Before I started teaching my two small group writing classes at Goodwill Industries of the Miami Valley, Inc., I wanted to be sure that my students would have a say in the structure of the class. I'd taught the class before, but I found that each time the needs of the students were so diverse that creating a classroom situation where they were active participants most of the time was very difficult. The first two times I taught the classes the reading levels of the students ranged from the 4th to the 10th grade, so I felt limited by what reading selections I could use with them. I also found that some of the students seemed to feel out of place because it was very obvious that their reading was not as strong as others. Further, some students were clearly reluctant to share ideas in writing because they didn't feel comfortable with this type of communication.

When I began teaching the classes in the fall of 1995, I decided to try something new: a pre-instruction questionnaire. Peter Jarvis (1983), in *Adult and Continuing Education: Theory and Practice*, advises teachers "to diagnose the students' level of knowledge and, thereby, their learning needs, before actually endeavoring to teach anything at all" (p. 111). With this in mind I tried to design a questionnaire that would give me as much information about the students' knowledge and background in writing as possible. There were several purposes for the questionnaire. First, I wanted to see what kinds of writing students currently did or had done in the past. This was important to help me find a beginning point with each student. Second, the questionnaire allowed me to see what types of writing interested my students so that I could incorporate some of those assignments into the class. Third, the questionnaire enabled me to get the individual students' view of their own writing--which also lets me get a glimpse of their confidence and comfort level with writing. Finally, I wanted to see if students had thought about what personal goals they wanted to achieve by completing the writing course.

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After creating the questionnaire with the above objectives in mind, I went back and attempted to categorize the questions based on their purpose. In doing so, I found five categories of questions. The first set of questions is the "types" questions. These questions gave me a sense of the students' experience with writing and their knowledge of different kinds of writing. They also gave me an idea of what kinds of assignments the students might want to experiment with or try for the first time. For example, more than half of the students in the two classes wanted to try to read and write short stories or poetry before the class was completed. So because of this interest, grammar instruction was incorporated into the class by reading and writing short stories.

A second group of questions that I found were the "likes/dislikes" questions. In these questions the students were asked what they liked and didn't like about writing, what authors they enjoyed reading, and what issues or topics that they would want to discuss in class. Each of these questions was open ended so that students could examine their own opinions about their writing. Further, the author and issue questions allowed me to see who the students wanted to read and what things they'd be interested in talking about in class. Only four of the twelve students mentioned a particular author, so I understood that one of three things may have taken place: They may not be that interested in what would be read in class, they may not have enough reading background to know who they like, or they may assume that the teacher is the primary source of information, so let him/her make those decisions. Finally, asking the students to name a few topics for discussion was a good idea because it gave me many options for discussion and journal writing in class. Ten of the twelve students responded to this question. They gave such interesting topics as the OJ Simpson case, aging issues, children's issues, racism, cruelty to animals, sports, violence, and many more. During the class we were able to discuss several of these topics plus some others that were pulled from the newspaper.

The third category of questions in the questionnaire was the "comfort level" questions. As the name suggests, the goal of these questions was to determine how comfortable students felt writing. One question asked: "How comfortable do you feel writing?" The students were given four choices: very comfortable, usually comfortable, somewhat comfortable, and not at all comfortable. I was surprised that nearly half of the class (5 of 12) felt very comfortable or usually comfortable when writing. I made the incorrect assumption that the vast majority of my students would dislike writing and be very anxious about the idea of writing for a class or in a small group setting. What I found during the class was that students' comfort levels did not necessarily represent their skill levels. Some of the students who answered in their questionnaires that they felt very comfortable did not necessarily perform as well as their confidence in themselves may suggest.

Another question that I included in the comfort level section asked: "How many times do you write during the week?" The student choices were 0-2 times, 3-5 times, 6-9 times, or more than 10 times. My assumption for this question was that the more comfortable students were with writing the more often that they would write. Again, this did not turn out to be the case. Of the five students who felt most comfortable writing, only two wrote more, on the average, than five times a week. In fact, just three of the twelve students in the classes wrote more than five times in a typical week. Two of those three students said they were very comfortable with writing; I also learned that they both kept daily journals. The other student said

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that she did not feel comfortable at all with writing.

The fourth category of questions was the "self-analysis" questions. In these questions I asked the students to think about themselves as learners, writers, and goal-setters. These questions were important to me because I was able to see how the students perceived their strengths and weaknesses in writing and in learning. Student responses to the question concerning their strengths in learning and writing ranged from having a positive attitude and keeping an open mind about new ideas, to having a strong and creative imagination, to one student who felt that she had no strengths at all when it came to writing. The majority of the students seemed to be very positive about their own attributes. Just the one previously mentioned student did not see in herself any positive learning traits. It was interesting to observe the way student attitudes developed and changed during the two months of class. Overall, the experience seemed to be very positive for all in the classes, including me.

The final two questions on the questionnaire were general questions for my own interest. In the first I asked the students if they had ever kept a diary or personal journal. I thought their responses might indicate their interest in writing in general. In fact, of the twelve students, seven had kept a journal at one time or another, although only one of the seven was actively keeping one at the outset of the class. The other question asked if the participants received a newspaper at their homes. Often, I will ask students to bring to class articles that they want to discuss with the group. I wanted to get an idea of how many students would be able to bring in articles if they were assigned. Between the two classes, eight students had newspapers delivered to their homes. To help accommodate the other students, I had a newspaper delivered to our classroom so they could read it during their breaks or before or after class.

Overall, using the pre-instruction questionnaire really helped me with these two classes because I was able to present the information to them in a more interesting way. Since I knew many of their attitudes about writing when the class started, I was able to assign topics for journals and discussions that I knew most of the group would find interesting. The questionnaires also helped me get a feel for writing and discussion topics the class found interesting before beginning teaching, which enabled me to structure the course to include things that I knew the class would want to do--something which some of my other classes did not have.

Reference

Jarvis, P. (1983). *Adult and continuing education: Theory and practice. Second edition.* New York: Routledge.

THE OHIO LITERACY RESOURCE CENTER IS LOCATED AT KENT STATE UNIVERSITY
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APPENDIX

Educational Enhancement Center Writing Class Questionnaire

1. What types of writing do you currently do? (Circle all that apply.)

   creative writing (poetry, short stories) | GED essay writing | business letters
   a diary or other personal journal | college composition | writing grocery lists
   "to-do" lists; messages--phone or otherwise | reports for class or work | other--please be specific

2. Of the types of writing listed above, which would you like to experiment with? (Please list all that apply.)

3. How comfortable do you feel writing?

   _____very _____usually comfortable _____somewhat _____not at all

4. On the average, how many times do you write during the week?

   _____0-2 times _____3-5 times _____6-9 times _____more than 10 times

5. Have you ever kept a diary or personal journal? _____yes _____no

6. What do you feel your strengths in learning and writing are? (Please be as specific as possible.)

7. What areas do you feel you are weakest at in writing or learning to write?

8. What types of writing do you want to try by the time this course is over? Circle all that apply.

   writing paragraphs | poetry | letters--business or personal
   writing GED essays | college-type essays | other--please be specific
   writing clear sentences | short stories | write for yourself--journals or other personal writing

9. What things do you like about writing?

10. What things do you not like or confuse you about writing?

11. Do you receive a newspaper at your home? _____yes _____no

12. What types of reading do you enjoy? (Please circle all that apply and even those you would like to try!)

    poetry | newspaper | magazines | short stories
    novels | non-fiction books | biographies | other--please be specific
    plays | journal articles/essays | histories

13. Are there any specific authors you would like to read?

14. What do you want to achieve by taking this writing class?

15. What types of issues or topics do you think would be interesting to discuss and write about in class? (Please write as many as you like; the more we have to choose from, the better for the class.)

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